An Overview of Forest Certification

Forest certification is a voluntary process that evaluates forest management practices against a set of sustainable forestry standards. This evaluation is typically performed by an independent third party. Certification can assure consumers that they are buying forest-related products that were grown, harvested and processed sustainably.

First Steps

Landowners should research the available programs or talk with a forestry professional to help decide whether certification makes sense and which system might be the best fit for their property.

An early step in any certification program is to obtain a written forest management plan. In Virginia, landowners can contact the Department of Forestry to get started with this process. The forester writing the plan should be made aware of intentions to certify, to ensure the proper components are addressed in the plan.

Forest Certification Costs

The cost of certification depends on the individual system used. All certified forests must have a current, written management plan, but the costs for obtaining a plan are not usually prohibitive to most landowners. Auditing or monitoring fees vary widely among the systems, and between standard and group certification.

For More Information

For more information about VDOF services or programs, please contact your local Virginia Department of Forestry office or visit:

www.dof.virginia.gov

Western Region Office, Salem:
Phone: (540) 387-5461

Central Region Office, Charlottesville:
Phone: (434) 977-5193

Eastern Region Office, Providence Forge:
Phone: (804) 966-5092

Virginia Department of Forestry
900 Natural Resources Drive, Suite 800
Charlottesville, Virginia 22903
Phone: (434) 977-6555
www.dof.virginia.gov

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A Guide and Overview

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Types of Forest Certification

There are two broad categories of forest management certification for landowners: standard and group. Standard certification is for an individual landowner. Forest management practices are audited by a third party each year, and the landowner pays the cost of the audit. Group certification collectively certifies a group of landowners under one certificate, which is issued to a group manager. This structure reduces costs to individual landowners since only some of the properties in the group are audited each year.

Forest management certification also factors into an end-product certification called Chain of Custody. This certification tracks wood from certified forests to finished products, which are usually marked with a logo identifying the certification system. Keeping track of individual trees as they are moved from the woods, to a mill, to a store is a complicated process, but it lets consumers make purchasing decisions based on sustainable forest practices.

Certification Benefits

Certification can benefit a landowner in several ways.

1. Increased access to markets – A growing number of consumers are seeking wood and paper products from certified forests. Thus, private landowners whose woods are certified may receive preferential treatment by timber buyers.
2. Acknowledgement of good forest management – Certification publicly recognizes landowners who are implementing sustainable management practices. This recognition alone may be enough for many landowners to certify their lands.
3. Potential for better forest management – Landowners with certified forests are required to have current, written management plans, and they have access to additional educational materials and opportunities. Together, these can result in more sustainably managed forests, as well as benefits to wildlife, water quality and recreation.

Certification Options

Each certification system has its own standards, but they all address timber and non-timber forest values; maintenance of forest productivity and biodiversity; protection of soil and water, and aesthetic, recreational, cultural and wildlife benefits. While similar in many aspects, there are some key differences among the systems. An individual landowner's management goals and his or her land base will help determine which system, if any, is best for him or her.

The three major certification systems in Virginia are the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the American Tree Farm System® (ATFS) and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI). All three certification systems require a written forest management plan. The ATFS is open to non-industrial private forest landowners. SFI certification was developed for forest industry-owned lands, but many large landowners and state lands have also certified under SFI. SFI also supports private forestland owners through a mutual agreement with the ATFS. Both ATFS and SFI are endorsed by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC), an umbrella organization over many certification systems worldwide. FSC is not a part of PEFC but is also internationally recognized. Under FSC, landowners may be individually certified, or the Southern Forests Network holds a group certificate that Virginia landowners can join.

Program Specifics

More information on each of the certification programs can be found on the program websites:

American Tree Farm System:
www.treefarmsystem.org

Forest Stewardship Council:
www.fscus.org or www.fsc.org/smallholders

Sustainable Forestry Initiative:
www.sfiprogram.org/

Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification: www.pefc.org

Additional, non-biased information on certification can be obtained from Dovetail Partners Inc., the Pinchot Institute for Conservation and the Sustainable Forests Partnership.